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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 002729

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DEPT FOR EUR DAS BRYZA AND EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/05/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GAP BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND PROTESTERS WIDENS AS
DEMONSTRATIONS CONTINUE

REF: TBILISI 2719

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Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Street demonstrations against the Saakashvili government continue in Tbilisi for the fourth day on November 5, following their start on November 2 (reftel). Conservative estimates placed the crowd at up to 70,000 people on Rustaveli avenue at the peak on November 2. Georgian oligarch Badri Patarkatsishvili attended the first day of the protest and addressed the crowd, but then left Georgia and has not made further statements. On November 2, Speaker of Parliament Nino Burjanadze met with protest leaders but no real progress was achieved. The opposition leaders began calling for President Saakashvili's resignation on November 3. Some opposition leaders met with Burjanadze's staff and MP Giga Bokeria on November 3, but again without results. On Sunday, November 4, Salome Zourabichvili, one of the opposition leaders, met with the Ambassador to raise concern about the growing strength of more radical elements in the opposition and to convince the Ambassador to urge dialogue and compromise on President Saakashvili. As the protests continued over the weekend, many protesters from outside Tbilisi left town. The crowd in front of the Parliament grew smaller and more homogenous, being mostly men between 40 and 60 years old. On November 4, President Saakashvili released a taped interview in which he mentioned Georgia's recent successes, acknowledged problems with unemployment and inflation, but criticized the opposition as being manipulated by "black forces" involved in a "factory of lies." He defended his choice of a Fall date for elections by referring to potential Russian interference if they are held at the same time as Russian elections in Spring 2008. From our soundings, his message appears to have failed to resonate with the public. We sense rising disappointment with both the President and the opposition. Both sides appear to be unready to make concessions that will make them appear weak. End Summary.

Mass Protests Friday Taper Off
on Saturday and Sunday

22. (U) As they approached Tbilisi, opposition caravans reportedly encountered roadblocks and spikes strewn in their paths. The anti-government television channel Imedi showed them displaying the specially clumped nails that were sure to damage tires. The Embassy has heard other stories about bus drivers being deprived of their licenses by police. Nevertheless, large numbers of protesters, especially from Western Georgia, were successful in reaching Tbilisi by the opening of the demonstration on Friday afternoon.

13. (SBU) As had been anticipated since September 28, the demonstration called by the United Council of the Opposition, which includes all the opposition parties except the New Rightists and the Industrialists, began on November 2. The crowd was conservatively estimated at between 50,000 to 70,000 demonstrators. The opposition claimed 100,000 people, while the government officially admitted perhaps 35,000 protesters. The protests were all but entirely peaceful. The police presence was less visible than during the September 28 protest, when twelve buses of anti-riot police were seen in the vicinity of the protests. Embosfs witnessed one heated confrontation with police that occurred when protesters tried to enter a post office next door to Parliament and take down a banner showing the opposition as puppets of Badri Patarkatsishvili. This situation quickly resolved itself and the banner remained in place but was generally ignored.

14. (SBU) Although he had originally intended to keep his distance, oligarch Badri Patarkatsishvili attended the protest and twice briefly addressed the crowd. His message was simple, "I am with you." He was greeted with applause. Fliers were handed out in advance, showing his picture and repeating his message of the country's need for representative government and unity. Patarkatsishvili left the country on November 3 and has not been heard from as the protests have continued.

15. (U) On the evening of November 2, after repeated calls from the opposition leadership for the government to meet and take their demands seriously, the opposition and Burjanadze's staff agreed to a meeting. The leaders suggested the demonstrators could go home while the meeting took place and the crowd significantly diminished from that point. The Speaker refused to offer a change in the date of the elections as demanded by the opposition. Protesters remained

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on the streets for the rest of the night, some of them drinking wine and showing high spirits. The following day it was reported that two young supporters of the opposition were beaten by masked men while they were bringing food to the demonstrators. No other violence was reported.

16. (U) On November 3, disappointed by the government's lack of response, the opposition added a call for Saakashvili to resign to their list of formal demands. During the day, about 3000 demonstrators were at the Parliament, becoming somewhat more numerous in the evening. Imedi continuously televised the proceedings and their cameras remained focused on the podium and a tightly packed area in front of the dais, maintaining the impression of massive crowds. The leaders' rhetoric progressively became more strident. The People's Party's corpulent leader, Koba Davitashvili, mentioned his love for shashlik barbecue and said he and the protesters would "eat the government" like his favorite barbecue. Levan Berdzenishvili of the Republican Party compared Saakashvili to Romania's Ceausescu and warned he would end up like Ceausescu or Milosevic if he does not resign.

17. (C) The opposition again met with National Movement MPs on November 3. Reportedly, Presidential confidant and member of Parliament Giga Bokeria was visibly irritated with the opposition's treatment of Burjanadze. He said that the opposition demanded to speak with Saakashvili himself and largely refused to negotiate with Burjanadze.

Moderates Fear Losing Ground to Radicals

18. (C) On Sunday, November 4, Salome Zourabichvili, leader of the party "Georgia's Way" and a relatively moderate voice among the opposition, called on the Ambassador. She insisted that her followers do not want a revolution, they want

change, and she is well aware that the Russians are delighted by the disarray in Tbilisi. She expressed concern that more radical elements, such as Labor Party supporters of firebrand Shalva Natelashvili, are gaining strength at her expense, and Saakashvili is not providing material to strengthen the moderates against them. She considers Saakashvili too beholden to intransigent advisors like Bokeria, who portrays the opposition to Saakashvili as unyielding on their side. Zourabichvili said international unwillingness to back opposition demands was also encouraging Saakashvili to stand firm. She sought the Ambassador's assistance to draw a response from Saakashvili that would begin to defuse the situation. The Ambassador told Zourabichvili that the USG cannot take a position on the date of elections, but has advocated changes to make the electoral system more fair and will continue to do so. Furthermore, he said, we are encouraging Saakashvili to enter into dialogue with the opposition, but as Assistant Secretary Fried had said publicly, we are not mediating the crisis.

Saakashvili Speech Disappoints Many

¶9. (U) The protests continued for a third day on November 4, with up to 10,000 people in front of Parliament at its peak. Late in the day, it was announced that President Saakashvili would appear on television at ten o'clock p.m. His appearance was in the form of an interview recorded earlier in the day. Saakashvili defended the government's achievements since the Rose Revolution, including new infrastructure, reliable energy supplies and stronger defense capabilities. He admitted problems like continued, widespread unemployment and inflation, but pointed to new factories being opened and blamed inflation on monopolies' control over imports. He attributed the opposition's success so far to support from "dark forces" and a "factory of lies" similar to what attacked Boris Yeltsin in Russia in the 1990's. He accused them of attempting to repeat the Rose Revolution, but this time without any talent. He warned that the opposition protests are creating the impression of a weakening Georgia. Turning to the opposition's specific demands, he said that the date for elections was changed to prevent Russian politicians from stirring up trouble in Georgia for the benefit of their own chances in elections to be held in late 2007 and early 2008. He also said concern about the possible recognition of Abkhazia by Russia in the aftermath of Kosovo independence influenced the decision. Despite the opposition's demands, he refused to consider changing the Georgian election date.

¶10. (C) Saakashvili's performance disappointed many Georgians with whom we have talked, in that he did not seem

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to take the opposition's challenge head on and address the real concern many citizens feel about the economic and social situation in the country. Predictably, opposition leaders were dismissive. Berdzenishvili called the interview "utter nonsense" and more moderate leaders, like Zourabichvili, considered that he is out of touch with the people. The opposition announced plans on Monday to picket administrative buildings in order to ratchet up the pressure on the government.

Comment

¶11. (C) The size of the protests reflects what is a real concern among many Georgians about an economy that is growing but is not yet producing jobs, especially for older workers who may have been doing relatively well in Soviet days before the collapse of the economy in the early 1990's. The Saakashvili government's apparent belief in its own invincibility has also resulted in a widespread impression

that it is arrogant and unwilling to listen to the working man's social and economic concerns. The protests on Friday were swelled with a large number of people from the regions. By Saturday and Sunday, the few thousand protesters remaining on the streets were by and large male, from 40-60 years old, and apparently workers or casually self-employed people. Only a smattering of women, young people or intelligentsia were observable, by contrast to the 2003 Rose Revolution which brought Georgians from every walk of life to the street. Many of the demonstrators are reportedly supporters of the leftist Shalva Natelashvili and his Labor Party. Even as we hear disappointment with the government's efforts to address the key economic and social concerns, we also hear rising criticism of the opposition for its unrealistic demands and shrill, demagogic rhetoric.

TEFFT